

POLITICS

OCTOBER 29, 2019 / 6:17 AM / 2 MONTHS AGO

Trump tweet, political divisions fuel rising discourse about new U.S. civil war

Julia Harte



MIDDLETOWN, Va. (Reuters) - Sporting a Confederate flag shirt near a field clouded by cannon smoke, where blue- and gray-clad soldiers reenacted a Civil War battle from 155 years ago, Larry Caldwell Piercy, Jr. said he sees a new war looming in the United States - and a role for himself in any fighting.

**EXHIBIT
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Actors portraying Union and Confederate soldiers reenact the U.S. Civil War Battle of Cedar Creek in Middletown, Virginia, U.S. October 19, 2019. REUTERS/Julia Harte

“It would be all guerrilla warfare, not this open field-style kind of thing,” he said, gesturing at the reenactment of the 1864 Battle of Cedar Creek in Middletown, Virginia, earlier this month. “I would probably be an officer in that effort.”

Piercy, 62, is one of the motorcycle riders known as the “mechanized cavalry” of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, which has an estimated 30,000 members and describes itself as a “non-political heritage organization” that preserves the history and legacy of soldiers in the pro-slavery Confederacy in the 1861-1865 Civil War.

He is also a fierce supporter of President Donald Trump.

As Democrats push to impeach Trump and controversy rages over whether to remove monuments to Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, Piercy warned a new civil war is brewing.

“You look into rural areas, and we’re not seen, but there’s a lot of us that’ll come out of these hills if it keeps getting worse. Probably every Sons of Confederate Veterans member out there.”

The Sons of Confederate Veterans, which limits membership to men with Civil War veteran ancestors, is not seeking to secede from the nation or to revive slavery, both Southern causes in the 1861-1865 Civil War. But they say they are trying to preserve the honor of the Confederacy by celebrating its flag, monuments, and other symbols that are widely criticized as tributes to institutional racism.

“#CivilWar2” trended on Twitter in September after Trump quoted a pastor in a Twitter post saying it would “cause a Civil War like fracture” in the United States if he were removed from office.

The next day, the right-wing Oath Keepers militia affirmed Trump's tweet in its own Twitter post: "This is the truth. This is where we are. We ARE on the verge of a HOT civil war. Like in 1859."

Mary McCord, who led the Justice Department's national security division from 2016 until May 2017, noted the response from the Oath Keepers and other pro-Trump armed groups, and said members of the U.S. militia movement have shown they are ready to take action based on the president's comments.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

While there is no evidence that radical groups on the right or left are organizing a military campaign to plunge the country into civil war, a number of attacks in recent years have raised concerns about a surge in political violence.

A woman was killed when a white nationalist plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters at a rally of right-wing extremists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017.

In August, a suspected white nationalist shot dead 22 people at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, shortly after posting an anti-Hispanic manifesto online.



Violent rhetoric about an impending civil war is on the rise, said J.J. MacNab, a fellow specializing in anti-government extremism at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. "It used to be just the militia guys saying this stuff, and now it's gone totally mainstream," she said.

Slideshow (4 Images)

She pointed to a YouTube video posted in June that drew 1.4 million views. The video detailed how the electrical grid in “major leftist cities” could be taken down, and concluded that another civil war was inevitable and would be won by the right wing.

Georgetown University’s Institute of Politics and Public Service this month released a poll that found a majority of Americans think political, racial, and class divisions are worsening, and that the average voter believes the United States is two-thirds of the way to the edge of a civil war.

Trump’s supporters at the Cedar Creek reenactment said Democratic opposition to the president had inflamed old rifts in U.S. society and pushed some to extreme positions.

“You got some Sons of Confederate Veterans members that would start shooting tomorrow,” said Jake Jennette, 79, a reenactor portraying General Lee.

He and his friend Wayne Newnam, who represented Lee’s lieutenant general Jubal Early, said they used to be part of the group but left because they didn’t like the violent turn that some members had taken.

Dave Clarke, who manned a table distributing Sons of Confederate Veterans literature and merchandise at the reenactment, said violent white supremacists had misappropriated the Confederate flag, and that he had faith in the U.S. system of government to resolve differences peacefully.

“There’s probably people here who’ve got AK-47s in their trunks but that’s not the answer. We’ve been there and done that. That’s not the way,” Jennette said, tears coming to his eyes as he recalled his own military service in Vietnam and his son’s tour in Afghanistan.

He too supports Trump and believes the best way to avoid a war would be the “total annihilation of the liberals” at the ballot box when Trump seeks a second four-year term in the 2020 election.

Newnam, 70, said he thought the United States had healed from the Civil War by the 1920s but is “regressing” to a state of polarization. He mainly blamed liberal resistance to Trump for the divide, but acknowledged that some of Trump’s tweets have not helped.

“The resentment was already there, and it’s easy to drum it up again,” said Newnam. “Social media has allowed people to be nasty to other people without having to face them. Maybe the Trumpster has brought that out a little. God knows some mornings I wish he’d sleep a little later,” he added, chuckling.

Reporting by Julia Harte; Editing by Kieran Murray and Daniel Wallis

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